

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

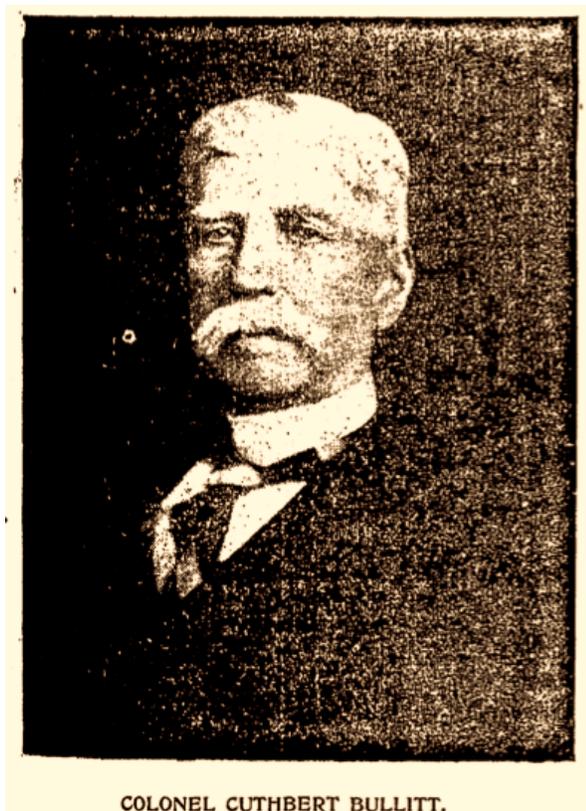
Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Dashing and Dapper

His obituary appeared in the August 5, 1906, issue of *The New York Times*:

“Louisville, Ky., Aug. 4 – Col. Cuthbert Bullitt, one of the most widely known Kentuckians, died to-day at the age of 97 (*he was actually 96*). He was appointed Collector of Customs at New Orleans by President Lincoln and served in that capacity for several years, afterwards holding other Federal appointments. He was known as a great beau, and throughout his life was extremely particular regarding his personal appearance.”



Colonel Cuthbert Bullitt (January 16, 1810 – August 4, 1906)

The Lexington Herald of Lexington, Kentucky, characterized Colonel Bullitt as the “Oldest Knight Templar in Kentucky” and “the Beau Brummel of his day”. Eliza Ripley, in her wonderfully observant *Social Life in Old New Orleans, Being Recollections of My Girlhood* (New York; London: D. Appleton and Company, 1912), wrote that Colonel Bullitt “lived and dashed many years after dashing ceased to be becoming.”

The first Cuthbert Bullitt (c.1740 – 1791) was a prominent planter and lawyer from Prince William County, Virginia. Descended from French Huguenots (in France the name was *de Boulette*), he was also a colonial political leader during the American Revolutionary War. His brother, General William Bullitt, served on General Lafayette’s staff during that conflict. General Bullitt’s son, also named Cuthbert Bullitt, was one of the first merchants of Louisville, Kentucky. He and Anne Neville were the parents of our subject, actually Cuthbert Bullitt, Jr. Cuthbert, Sr., built a fine brick house in Louisville at Fifth and Main streets, where young Cuthbert was born on January 16, 1810.



*Eliza White Bullitt, photo courtesy of Maunsel White
(great-great-grandson of Colonel Maunsel White)*

On Lafayette’s visit to Louisville when young Cuthbert Bullitt was just a lad, the Marquis hugged they boy’s grandfather and kissed him “on both cheeks”. Cuthbert recalled, “Youngster as I was, I remember I thought he had better have been kissing some pretty woman.”

As a young gentleman, Cuthbert Bullitt moved from Louisville to New Orleans. In 1829, at the age of nineteen, he managed to infuriate

Colonel Maunsel White (c. 1783 – December 17, 1863) by eloping with his daughter. Colonel White, an entrepreneurial Irish-American politician, merchant and planter, not only fought bravely in the Battle of New Orleans but also created a “decoction,” of the “tobasco [*sic*] red pepper” at least some eighteen years before Edmund McIlhenny produced his sauce at Avery Island. How White’s mixture mentioned in an 1850 article in the New Orleans *Delta* compared to the Tabasco Sauce of today is not certain, but Colonel White was as hot as his peppers when he heard that his young daughter Eliza had eloped with Cuthbert Bullitt. Concerning the scandal endured by the “genial Irishman” and “veteran of Chalmette, who won his title on the field,” Eliza Ripley wrote, “his serenity was disturbed”.

Here are Cuthbert Bullitt’s own words on his marriage to Eliza:

“After some time I became enamored of a beautiful lady, a charming woman, who inspired the one perfect love in my long life. She was the daughter of Colonel White, a distinguished merchant, who had served on General Jackson’s staff at the Battle of New Orleans. We were married in the early 30’s. Five children were born to us, but all died, one son living to be 18 years old. He died just before the war. No doubt, had he lived, he would have been in the Confederacy, though I was on the other side. My wife died in Louisville in 1872 or 1873.

My father-in-law, who was a widely-known and esteemed cotton factor, made me a partner in his business. This connection brought me into contact with two Presidents of the United States, General Jackson and General Taylor. They were cotton growers, and transacted their business through our house. I have had the honor of dining with them at Colonel White’s house. General Jackson was an austere man, and as I was an old-line Whig, there was no great intimacy between us.”

In 1848, a grand ball and a barbecue were held in honor of Mexican War hero General Zachary Taylor at the Pass Christian Hotel in Mississippi. Referred to as the “Saratoga of the South,” the hotel was purchased by Cuthbert Bullitt in 1851 for \$10,000.

Living in New Orleans when the Civil War broke out, Cuthbert Bullitt, a personal friend of Abraham Lincoln and an intensely loyal Northern sympathizer, created a storm of indignation among his New Orleans neighbors by proudly displaying the flag of the United States from his balcony. Over it he placed the Kentucky coat of arms with the motto “United we stand, divided we fall”. William Tecumseh Sherman wrote that shortly after Louisiana seceded from the Union, “only one national flag was shown from a house” in New Orleans. That was “the house of Cuthbert Bullitt, on Lafayette Square.” A mob gathered who were hell-bent on stringing him up, but (with drawn revolver) Bullitt threatened any who might take down the flag.

Wisdom prevailed, however, and Cuthbert Bullitt decided to make his way to the safety of Louisville, Kentucky, where his wife was waiting.

"By the almighty jingo, sir," said Bullitt, "I was on my way north at 9 o'clock that night, sir."

He took his dining-room servant, named Washington, with him on the perilous journey. Ironically, for this staunch Unionist who believed in slavery, having his slave with him helped him get to his destination without a pass. "Two piratical looking men," said Bullitt, entered his railcar and flashed a lantern in his face. "I told them I was a Southerner, on my way to Louisville, my native place, to see my family, and did not think it necessary to have a pass." It was then that "Washington saved me."

"Who are you," they asked Washington.

After pointing to Bullitt, Washington told them he belonged "to him long time."

After the occupation of New Orleans by Union troops, Bullitt returned as Lincoln's Collector of Customs. He also later served as United States Marshal in this district. Bullitt was President of the National Union Association of New Orleans, "its object" (a newspaper article suggested) "is most probably the spoils," or political patronage.

A piece in the *Lexington Herald* states that Cuthbert Bullitt was a "gentleman of the old school". A man "exquisite in dress and of courtly manner, he lived a life of leisure and elegance during almost the entire sum of his years." The paper went on to say that "essentially he was a man of the clubs and drawing rooms of the two foremost Southern cities – Louisville and New Orleans. Equally at home in either place ... he vibrated between the two, spending his winters in New Orleans" and his summers in Louisville. In New Orleans he was a member of the Boston Club and was regarded as a sort of honorary member of the Chess, Checkers and Whist Club.

CUTHBERT BULLITT'S
ROMANTIC CAREER,
—
Much of Which Was Laid in Old New
Orleans,
—
Where He Won His Wife, and Where
He Dared
—
Raise the Federal Flag in Hottest War
Time.
—
Story Told by Himself, Although His
Colored Valet Will Write
Full Biography.

Picayune headline from August 7, 1906

One can still pass by the Bullitt home at 607 St. Charles Avenue (now a law firm) that Maunsel White sold his daughter Eliza in 1833 (the house Sherman referred to on Lafayette Square). Originally a two-story residence, Eliza added a third story and balconies, but in 1868 a much grander residence was constructed for the couple. The *Daily Picayune* of September 1, 1868, mentions "a beautiful Swiss villa" as one of "the many elegant buildings springing up in Jefferson City". This one, the paper reported, is "being erected in the centre of a large square of ground" and is "being built by our fellow citizen Cuthbert Bullitt, Esq."

Located in the 3800 block of St. Charles Avenue on the present site of the Columns Hotel, the "Swiss villa" house construction was personally supervised by architect Edward Gottheil, who had been appointed chief commissioner from Louisiana to the International Exposition of Paris in 1850. There were a number of buildings on the Exposition grounds with a Swiss flavor, and it is understood that he brought plans back

from Europe for this "Swiss chalet style" home back in New Orleans. Gottheil is also known to have built the residence at 1206 Third Street in the Garden District for Confederate General John Bell Hood.



Cuthbert Bullitt's Swiss Villa, now on Carondelet Street

The house sits upon eight-foot high brick piers and has a most impressive broad center hall. The façade is five bays wide with the entrance in the center. The house was purchased in 1881 by Frederick Ford Hansell and called simply "Hansell's Cottage". Cigar manufacturer Simon Hershheim bought the property two years later, only to move it to its current 3627 Carondelet Street location. Hershheim wanted the St. Charles Street location for his own totally different mansion, which is today (after numerous changes) the present-day Columns Hotel. In 1884, the "Swiss villa" (now on Carondelet) became the residence of John G. Parham.

A succession of nine other owners occupied the house until Geoffrey Longenecker purchased it in 1975. Up until then, the structure was for a time even divided into separate apartments. In 1980, Drs. Lynn and Harold Neitzschman, Jr., became the new owners and made a number of renovations. Two massive elegant mirrors, rumored to have a Storyville provenance, were obtained from the Kreeger's store on Canal Street and placed in the great hall and dining room.



Mardi Gras beads now hang from the balcony at 607 St. Charles Avenue, where Cuthbert Bullitt once flew the American flag in "Hottest War Time"



House when it only had two stories

For the past twenty years, this historic villa has been owned by Henry and Joan Folse. They have been excellent stewards of this unique property, which was designated a local landmark in 1980 and bestowed the highest architectural rating by the Historic Landmarks Commission. Damage from Hurricane Katrina in 2005 was only one of their challenges. Their home is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Maunsel White, descendant of Colonel Maunsel White, related that his great-great-grandfather Colonel Maunsel White was also a friend of William Neville Bullitt, Cuthbert's brother. A "further connection" was that Cuthbert's wife, Eliza's sister, Anne, had two daughters who married two of William Neville Bullitt's sons (Malcolm and Alex)." He added, "There are numerous letters in the National Archives between Cuthbert and Lincoln and others in Government during and after the Civil War. Interestingly, Eliza's sister married a Hugh Kennedy, who for a time during the Civil War served as Lincoln's appointed Mayor of New Orleans during the occupation." All of this is "very ironic," said Maunsel, since their father-in-law, Maunsel White, "was an ardent supporter of slavery" and slaveowner himself, who "made his fortune" doing business with planters.

After Cuthbert Bullitt's ownership of the "Swiss villa", the debonaire Southern gentleman spent many of his years a widower, when, toward the end of September, 1892, at age 82, he vanished from his Louisville home. This disappearance coincided with that of Mrs. Mary Shreve Goodloe Ransom, twice widowed and the richest woman in the State of Kentucky. She was 50 years old, "very sprightly" and said to be worth \$1,000,000. Whispers grew louder and denials followed: "We are still friends, and nothing more," replied the wealthy Mrs. Ransom. But almost immediately thereafter, on October 3, 1892, there was a spectacular wedding, largely attended and with (according to the *Charleston News and Courier*) *beaucoup* "Veuve Cliquot".

Sadly, wrote the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, things did not go well for "the octogenarian beau". Just over a year later, the couple separated in December, 1893. She charged him with cruelty and excessive cursing "and, at last, wounded her by refusing to do the family marketing." Her "household intimates" insinuated "that the aged colonel was a fortune hunter," going after her million dollars, but the Colonel refuted this by stating he had signed an "ante-nuptial agreement" (the term then in use). His friends defended him and said he was not capable of cruelty. As for the cursing, whether or not "by gad, sir" and "by jingo, sir" (which he did use quite often) counted as cursing is left to one's imagination. The divorce of "the gallant Colonel and vivacious widow" was highly publicized around the country and caused "a social hubbub" in New Orleans and Louisville.

According to an article in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* in 1899, after her divorce from Cuthbert Bullitt, "Blue Grass belle" Mrs. Ransom reconnected with a previous beau. It was the German Baron Von Norde of Berlin, nephew of the late Prince Bismarck. The Baron's family had seen to it years before that the affair be broken off. She met once again in Chicago in the summer of 1898, and once again he asked her to be his. She invited him to Louisville, held a huge reception in his honor and told him she would give him her answer on November 1. On that date, he went down on his knees and popped the question. "With an arise-sir-knight air she bade him regain his feet," telling him "she preferred a cabin in Kentucky to a castle in Germany." The paper reported, "Thus was she avenged."

Safely apart from such drama, at 96, the old gentleman was now the oldest native-born resident of Louisville, Kentucky. He had been keen on giving interviews about his colorful past, and most of the nation was intensely interested in the life of this fascinating Southern Colonel. He was well attended during his final days at the St. Joseph Infirmary in Louisville by his loyal valet, Edward Dorsey, who read to him the events of the day.

"God," Colonel Bullitt always said, "had been good to him." He died August 4, 1906.

A citizen of two stylish Southern cities, a "Beau Brummell" and a Southern Colonel who believed in the Federal Union, Cuthbert Bullitt is truly a person of historical interest. He left behind a period when Cotton was King, two very different belles and (in the Crescent City) two dwellings of immense architectural and historical significance.

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"Dashing and Dapper"
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